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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing acceptance of the value of psychotherapy, there are still those who think people should solve their own problems. A study was conducted to investigate the attitudes of college students toward seeking professional help before and after taking a course in abnormal psychology to determine whether exposure to the purposes and methods of clinical psychology would produce more positive attitudes in students. Forty students enrolled in an Abnormal Psychology course and 29 students in a Psychology of Consciousness course completed the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale during the first class meeting and again during the last class meeting. Students in the Abnormal Psychology class showed significantly more positive attitudes toward seeking help for psychological problems at the end of the semester than at the beginning. Students enrolled in the Psychology of Consciousness class showed no significant difference in attitude. Males were significantly less positive than females in their attitudes toward seeking help. These findings have implications for instructors of psychology courses. (Author/NB)

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Changing Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help

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Abstract

Forty college students in an Abnormal Psychology course and twenty-nine students in a Psychology of Consciousness course completed the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale (Fischer & Turner, 1970) during the first class meeting and again during the last class meeting. Students enrolled in the Abnormal Psychology course showed significantly ($t < .05$) more positive attitudes toward seeking help for psychological problems at the end of the semester than at the beginning. Students enrolled in the Psychology of Consciousness course showed no significant difference ($t > .05$) in attitude. Males were significantly less positive ($t < .05$) than females in their attitudes toward seeking help. The implications of these results for the goals set by instructors of psychology courses will be discussed.

Despite the increasing acceptance in recent years of the value of psychotherapy, there are still those who are convinced that people should solve their own problems. Some may view the seeking of professional help as an option open only to the weak and dependent, while others may be primarily concerned with what others will think of them if it is known that they are seeing a psychologist or psychiatrist.

Fischer and Turner (1970) developed the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale to investigate individual orientations toward the utility of psychotherapy. They formulated norms for high school, college, and nursing school students, and examined sex differences.

The purposes of the present study were to investigate whether the attitudes of college students have become more positive since 1970, and to examine attitudes before and after a course in Abnormal Psychology to find out whether exposure to the purposes and methods of clinical psychology would produce more positive attitudes in students.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were forty students enrolled in an Abnormal Psychology course and twenty-nine students enrolled in a Psychology of Consciousness course during the summer session at a small campus of a state university. Fifty-three

of the subjects were female and sixteen were male. The average age of the students was about 25 years, and the classes contained a good mix of traditional and nontraditional students. Both classes were held in the evenings.

Questionnaires

The Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale (Fischer & Turner, 1970) is scored on a four point likert-style scale. It contains twenty-nine statements designed to assess the individual's reluctance or positive orientation to seeking professional help. Subjects indicate how strongly they agree with such statements as "There are experiences in my life that I would not discuss with anyone" and "At some future time I might want to have psychological counseling."

The Acceptance of Others Scale (Fey, 1955) is scored on a five point likert scale. It contains twenty statements designed to assess how tolerant of others the individual is. It has been noted that acceptance of others and acceptance of self are highly correlated. Subjects indicate how strongly they agree with such statements as "I can be comfortable with nearly all kinds of people" and "I enjoy myself most when I am alone, away from people."

The Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein et al, 1975) is scored on a five point likert scale. It is designed to assess the extent to which individuals are aware of their

own feelings and motivations. Subjects indicate the extent of their agreement with such statements as "I'm always trying to figure myself out" and "I'm alert to changes in my mood."

The Index of Peer Relations (Hudson, 1977) is scored on a five point likert scale. It is designed to assess the degree to which individuals fit into their social group. Subjects indicate the extent of their agreement with such statements as "I don't feel like I am 'part of the group'" and "My peers regard my ideas and opinions very highly."

Procedure

The subjects completed the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale (Fischer & Turner, 1970) during the first class meeting and again during the last class meeting of the semester. During the first class, the students also completed the Acceptance of Others Scale (Fey, 1955), the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier & Buss, 1975), and the Index of Peer Relations (Hudson, 1977) to disguise the purpose of the testing. At the last class meeting, students completed only the relevant form, which was given to them after they finished their final examinations.

Results and Discussion

The students enrolled in the Abnormal Psychology course showed significantly ($t < .05$) more positive attitudes

toward seeking help for personal problems at the end of the semester than at the beginning. The students enrolled in the Psychology of Consciousness course showed no significant ($t > .05$) change in attitude. See Table 1. These results suggest that it is not mere exposure to a psychology course that makes the difference in student attitudes toward psychotherapy, but the specific content of the Abnormal Psychology course. Abnormal Psychology is an upper division course, and the students had had exposure to the subject matter of psychology before. Nevertheless, their average score ($X = 57.40$) on the first day of class was similar to the average first day score ($X = 58.21$) of the students in the Psychology of Consciousness class, a 100-level course, which constituted the first exposure to psychology for many of the students.

As expected, the males' attitudes ($X = 50.85$) toward seeking professional help were significantly ($t < .05$) less positive than the attitudes of the females ($X = 60.13$). This fits sex-role expectations that males must be independent and active in solving their own problems, while females may be dependent and rely on others for support. No sex differences were found on the other scales administered. It was surprising to find that both males ($t < .05$) and females ($t < .05$) showed less positive attitudes in 1986 than did the subjects tested by Fischer and Turner in 1970.

Correlations were computed for the four scales, and several positive relationships were found. See Table 2. High

scores on the Self-Consciousness Scale correlated negatively with high scores on the Acceptance of Others Scale; in other words, those who were most reflective and aware of their own thoughts and feelings were least tolerant of those of others.

High scores on the Acceptance of Others Scale correlated positively with high scores on the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Help Scale. Those who were most tolerant of the opinions of others are also most likely to seek out the suggestions of others when they have problems. In addition, high scores on the Index of Peer Relations (which is a reverse score) correlated negatively with the Acceptance of Others Scale; in other words, those who had the poorest relationships with their peers also had the least tolerance of others. The average score ($X = 64.69$) on the Acceptance of Others Scale in this sample was significantly ($t < .05$) lower than the norms ($X = 75$) established by Fey (1955).

It is troubling that the students who participated in this study show such intolerance of others and such reluctance to seek help with their personal problems. Such changes may be caused, at least in part, by the changing political climate with its intolerance of diversity, and its media heroes such as Rambo who rely on personal strength and determination, suggesting that individuals can solve problems better than groups, governments or experts.

The results of this study indicate the importance of psychology classes to the changing of such attitudes. Instructors would do well to include in their courses class discussions and projects that emphasize the importance of empathy, of putting oneself in someone else's place. It is also clear that learning about psychotherapy and the positive results it can bring about will encourage students to consider seeking help when they need it. This learning can be stressed in the Introductory course for the benefit of those students who do not go on to advanced work in psychology.

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